

Good Eats!

The diet of American Indians in North Carolina has changed greatly since the arrival of European explorers in the 1500s. Today, Indians go to the grocery store and eat at McDonalds just like everyone else. But early Indian tribes lived off the land by hunting, fishing, gathering, and cultivating plants. In fact, they had some foods that the Europeans had never seen before.

The first explorers in North Carolina recorded the types of food that Indians ate. John White, governor of the “Lost Colony” on Roanoke Island, drew a picture of an Indian village that shows three cornfields. Corn, or *maize*, was an especially important food for



John White painting: An Indian man and woman eating.
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North Carolina’s Indians. It could be roasted or boiled. It could also be dried and pounded into meal and flour to make bread. And did you know that American Indians ate popcorn?

Beans and squash were two other important foods. Corn, beans, and squash—called the “Three Sisters”—were often grown together. This is called “companion planting.” The three plants helped each other grow. Corn provided stalks for the beans to grow around, the beans put important

nutrients into the soil, and the squash covered the ground to keep out weeds and keep the soil moist.

The women of a tribe usually took care of the garden and also gathered berries and other foods that grew in the wild. Sweet potatoes, pumpkins, peppers, peanuts, strawberries, and blackberries were among the foods that European explorers reported seeing Indians eat.

In addition to eating vegetables and fruits, Indians ate fish and meat. They fished using nets and hooks made from animal bone, and they also gathered mussels and other shellfish. Many tribes hunted game using bows and arrows or by trapping the animals. Deer was an especially important food source, but bear, rabbits, turtles, squirrels, opossums, and wild turkeys were also eaten. (There were no cows or pigs in America until colonists brought them here.) Meat was cooked over a fire or used in stews. Sometimes it was dried to preserve it so that it would last longer.

Nuts and seeds formed a part of the Indian diet. Acorns, hickory nuts, pecans, and walnuts were easily found from the Coastal Plain to the Mountains. American Indians

also grew sunflowers and ate the seeds. They used herbs such as bay leaves and sassafras to flavor their food (sassafras was also used as medicine).

Today, some American Indians use traditional cooking methods and eat some of the same foods their ancestors ate. They do this to remember and show respect for those who came before them. One way of celebrating their food heritage is to pass down recipes from one generation to the next.

Does your family have recipes that belonged to your grandparents or great-grandparents? Does making these recipes help you remember your ancestors?



John White painting: Indians Fishing
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